

Authority and Unitarian Universalism
Thinking for Yourself in a Climate of Groupthink

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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This is my third and final message in a series of sermons offering my response to a 2012 essay presented to the Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association by one of its members, Rev. Fredric Muir. Rev. Muir and I have opposing views about our religion. What he calls its errors, I consider its truths. What he's experienced as our inherent inability to work and get along with each other, I've experienced as caring and cooperative friends working together to make our lives, communities, and world better for everyone. What he calls covenant, I call dogma. What he calls beloved community, I call authoritarian groupthink. What he considers atomism and self-centeredness, I consider a commitment to the freedom and flourishing of every individual. What he considers our closeminded and off-putting rigidity, I consider an appropriate amount of humility in response to the deeper mysteries of our existence. What he considers our "allergy to authority and power," I consider the primary expression of our Enlightenment heritage and its commitment to freedom of thought and ideological tolerance.

In my previous two sermons, I spoke at length about why I feel it is crucial for Unitarian Universalists to be aware of Rev. Muir's essay since it has become the blueprint for the current deconstruction, if not demolition, of our once liberal religion. He says "that our way of faith, from its ministry to its members, has been supported and nurtured by a trinity of errors, leading not only to ineffectiveness but to an inability to share our liberating message." I've already addressed his first two errors, *individualism* and *exceptionalism*, and will address the third today. His antidote for all these errors is "covenant," which I consider a euphemism for church dogma and ecclesiastical authority. Nevertheless, the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association has been administering this antidote, including its plans to go from being a member service organization of autonomous congregations to an ecclesiastical body requiring its members to meet its doctrinal requirements by frequently renewing their promise to do so, and to offer proof they are satisfactorily doing so.

They justify these illiberal maneuvers in the name of what they call "antiracism and anti-oppression," because every authoritarian takeover arrives upon the coattails of a righteous cause that is conveniently and unquestionably used to silence and condemn any dissenters by demonizing them as heretics, apostates, heathens, witches, communists, terrorists, traitors, sympathizers, and—under this new ruse—racist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist.

I've experienced this diabolism firsthand, in more ways than one. Only a couple of years ago, for instance, some in our local Jewish community began calling me antisemitic for

publicly expressing my concerns about how Israel is mistreating and oppressing the Palestinian people. Not wishing to offend them, and more than willing to make concessions so long as my freedom of conscience remained intact, I invited their leaders to take the lead on the matter in our community or, at the very least, to provide us with a framework for discussing this injustice in a way they would not consider antisemitic or otherwise threatening. I was told it wasn't going to happen and if I kept talking about it, there would be a problem. I did, and there is.

Then, after giving away *The Gadfly Papers* last year, during the 2019 General Assembly, hundreds of Unitarian Universalist ministers immediately signed one of two letters calling me a racist and white supremacist, although they felt no ethical obligation to cite anything in my book proving such slander. Instead, they made up things I did not say, then listed their own beliefs to maliciously imply they are values I disagree with in my book. The first of the two letters, both of which were written before most could have read my book, faults it for, "continually asserting that if people of color would only be logical, things would be different." Nowhere in my book do I imply, let alone state, anything about people of color needing to become more logical. That's a lie numerous Unitarian Universalist ministers eagerly signed onto, which, to me, is as tragic as it is alarming. But it does not surprise me that unreasonable people feel threatened by reasonable arguments. Yet merely using logic is not an act of racism.

The second letter, signed by hundreds of UU ministers, explicitly states, "Instead of accepting the frame of Rev. Eklof's arguments and debunking them, we instead affirm the following." I won't take time to discuss their assertions here, since I only mean point out the slight-of-hand used to distract attention away from the actual contents of my book. That hundreds of Unitarian Universalist ministers would so immediately, ruthlessly, and baselessly, condemn a colleague without the courtesy of actually debunking, or even mentioning, the claims they take issue with, is as unethical as it should be unthinkable coming from the Unitarian Universalists who are leading hundreds of our congregations.

But this is not a "woe is me" sermon. I accepted the potential consequences of my book before writing it and giving it away, even if I couldn't have foreseen exactly what was coming. On the contrary, the reaction against my small book of essays has proven its points far better than its contents do. And it is precisely this reaction that also proves what the result of Rev. Muir's vision for our liberal religion really looks like.

In order to cover up the fact they had banned a minister from returning to the General Assembly for giving away a book, the Unitarian Universalist Association leadership issued a false statement implying it was because I was unwilling "to engage in a covenanting conversation," The letter of censure I received from the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, less than two months later, states, "We believe you have broken covenant," then goes on to use the word four more times, including the claim that it is "our" responsibility to "uphold covenant," and that ours is a "covenantal faith." And, as part of its justification for

excommunicating me last summer, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee went so far as to accuse me of violating my covenant with all of you by “fomenting divisiveness within the congregation you are covenanted to serve,” they said, based on what they were told from, guess who, their own UUA staff.

Of course, none of these communications cited the covenantal language I’m accused of breaking, for it is meant only as a euphemistic cover for the authoritarian intolerance now being demonstrated by those directing our liberal religion. As I have said before, ours is a liberal religion rooted in the Enlightenment principle that every individual should be free to think and speak for themselves and must have the courage to do so. It is a principle committed to the freedom and flourishing of every individual, to their right to stand out in a crowd, and to do so without fear of being punished or excluded—the same three qualities Rev. Muir calls our trinity of errors: individualism, exceptionalism, and our allergy to authority, the antidote for which he says is “covenant.”

I’ve previously spoken at length about how the misleading use of this word *covenant* is being used as an excuse to end the centuries old autonomy and independence of our congregations and turn us into a hierarchal religion forced to adhere to the new “doctrine of church,” which is why I am compelled to conclude this series by addressing the error Rev. Muir refers to as “our allergy to authority and power.” I can understand how those wishing to steal an entire religion, then turn into its repulsive opposite—a dogmatic, punitive, ecclesiastical church—might frown upon individuals who think for themselves and are not inclined to simply follow orders.

Covenant, as it is being used, solves these inconveniences by empowering the Unitarian Universalist Association to justify its repressive behavior by claiming its victims have violated a promise they were coerced and fooled into making to begin with. Although I may have become the poster child for what this Orwellian *doublethink* leads to, many other ministers, seminary students, and church members have also experienced what can happen if one says the wrong things within Unitarian Universalist circles these days. Although the same phenomenon is now occurring everywhere within liberal organizations, that it is happening in our religion, which was established to be a sanctuary from such authoritarian abuses, is as shocking as it is heartbreaking.

In his brief history of Unitarianism, *For Faith and Freedom*, Rev. Charles Howe reminds us that Unitarianism emerged from a corresponding though separate reformation as the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Unlike Martin Luther, he says, “who retained many of the organizational and liturgical practices of Catholicism,” and John Calvin, who “attempted to place, not only his system of doctrine, but also his system of church organization and worship, on a firm biblical basis ... There were those—and their numbers were large—who were seeking a religious community of free spirits, one with no set standards of belief, little formal organization, and no prescribed forms of worship; instead they were seeking firsthand religious experience through direct communion with God.”¹

This new and liberal approach to theology, which gave deference to the individual over priests and preachers, and to humanity over church dogma and hierarchy, initially resulted in the Anabaptists, a group of believers who so greatly valued individual freedom that they rejected the validity of infant baptism, believing one's religion should be freely chosen by willing and thinking adults. They were the first to begin baptizing adults who had already been baptized as infants. Hence, their name, Anabaptists, which means "re-baptizers." They also wanted a religion, as Howe says, "completely free of state control,"² which wasn't well received by the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. This eventually led to the issuance of a formal death decree in 1529. They did their best to push back, but, "Following a bloody uprising by the Anabaptists in the city of Munster in 1535, thousands throughout the region were put to death, either by drowning, beheading, or burning. The leaders of the uprising were horribly tortured and executed, and their bodies were suspended in cages from a church tower, where they remained until 1811!"³ Can you imagine going to a church where the bodies of heretics remained on display for 276 years? Authoritarians intimidate their subjects by making public examples of any who defy them.

The Anabaptist may have been persecuted out of existence, but their remnants went on to become those groups we know today as Baptists, Mennonites, and Unitarians, all of whom continue to maintain an independent church structure and congregational polity, and all of whom have had to struggle with internal authoritarian forces working to undermine such independence and freedom. Thirty-two years after the Massacre, Unitarianism was formally born in Transylvania when King John Sigismund chose it as his religion during the 1567 Diet of Torda. A year later, he passed the Edict of Torda: a law protecting freedom of conscience and religious tolerance by guaranteeing "no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone ... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching."

It is because of this long history and hard-won victory that, to this day, our congregations have the sole authority to call, ordain, and install the ministers of their choosing, rather than have them imposed upon us from on high to preach only in the interests of the greater Church authorities. But this is no longer so today. We may have the illusion we are still free to do so, but the Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Ministers Association have set up systems virtually guaranteeing no ministerial aspirant can be credentialed who hasn't swallowed their Cool Aid. Just look at how many hundreds signed the White Ministers Letter in kneejerk response to *The Gadfly Papers*.

Although American Unitarianism emerged somewhat independently from its older, Eastern European cousin, it has been historically no less committed to the principles of religious freedom and tolerance. Like the founders and framers of the United States, America's brand of Unitarianism was inspired by the Enlightenment philosophy, summarized by Immanuel Kant as "the courage to use one's own understanding." The renowned Unitarian minister,

Rev. A. Powell Davies, who was minister of All Soul's Church in Washington, D.C., from 1933 until his death in 1957, called Democracy our nation's true spirituality, even if it is often resisted by other religions that prefer authoritarian governance maintained by dogmatism. When speaking of the origins of American Unitarianism, in particular, he reminds us that President John Quincy Adams, Vice President John C. Calhoun, journalist Joseph Gales, who was personally advised by Thomas Paine to start his revolutionary *Sheffield Register*, and other Enlightenment leaders, were among the founding members of his congregation in 1821, and among the earliest of Unitarians. "So, by this time," he says, "were many, if not most of the leading figures throughout the country, including [Thomas] Jefferson."⁴

After the American Revolution, Powell says, it was only natural that they should want to "form a church which was definitely based on freedom. As over against the free thinkers outside the churches, they wished to be free thinkers inside the churches, lest too much that is essential to religion might be cast away."⁵ If the Renaissance liberated humanity from the authoritarian Dark Ages, the flourishing of its principles during the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, was to help deliver America and its churches from the authoritarian colonialism and tyranny it had been founded upon. This is the reason Davies says, "Authoritarian systems, whether of church or state, are not American, and they cannot become American."⁶ As a liberal religion founded upon this same principle, I would say the same is true for Unitarianism: *Authoritarian systems are not Unitarian and cannot become Unitarian*. This is why, as the great 20th century Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, best friends with Erich Fromm, once said, "free choice is a principle without which religion, or society, or politics, cannot be liberal."⁷

In his book, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, historian David Robinson reminds us there were many notable 18th century Unitarians living in Philadelphia, "where Enlightenment values such as reason, tolerance, and moral service gained a stronghold,"⁸ including Benjamin Franklin's friend, Joseph Priestly, who founded the first Unitarian church in America, erected in Philadelphia in 1796. Jefferson called Priestly's writings "the basis of my own faith," and the reason he said, "I trust there is not a young man *now living* in the United States who will not die a Unitarian."⁹

Jefferson got it wrong, and today we have to worry if any young person now living in the United States who *will* die a Unitarian, since it has been taken over by a grotesque imposter. But just because we are devoted to free thinking and ideological tolerance does not mean we are antiauthoritarian, although we are compulsively discerning about the authorities we do trust and thoughtfully choose to help guide us. We trust the authority of reason. We trust the authority of science. We trust the authority of empirical facts. This is why Rev. Muir is right in saying covenant cannot coexist with individualism, although not, as he thinks, because it is the opposite of his trinity of errors, but because, the way it is being used, as a euphemism for dogma and control, is the opposite of freedom itself. The UUA and UUMA

are now using the word “covenant” as a cure for individual freedom and congregational autonomy (which they seem to consider diseases).

There are authorities that can earn our trust, but should they fail us, we maintain our own individual authority to ignore and dismiss and disobey them. Yet we trust no authority that claims the right to impose itself upon us by force, threat, and coercion. We do not trust dogma or dogmatists, and we are too smart not to see through their obvious euphemisms. We do not want church authorities or state authorities telling us what we must believe and what words must come out of our mouths. We will not make that devil’s bargain. We will promise no such thing. We never have, and we never will, at least as Unitarians, because, to paraphrase James Luther Adams, “free choice is a principle without which religion, or society, or politics, cannot be *Unitarian*.”

¹ Howe, Charles A., *For Faith and Freedom*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1997, p. 12f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13f.

⁴ Davies, A. Powell, *America’s Real Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1947, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷ Adams, James Luther, *On Being Human Religiously*, Stackhouse, Max L., ed., Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1976, p. 15.

⁸ Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1947, p. 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.